DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 558 TM 012 545

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TITLE Improving Your Test-Taking Skills. ERIC Digest Number 101.
INSTITUTION American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC.; ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Sep 88
CONTRACT RI-88-062003
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Essay Tests; High Schools; *High School Students; Multiple Choice Tests; Student Behavior; *Study Skills; *Test Coaching; Test Wiseness
IDENTIFIERS Fact Sheets

ABSTRACT

Techniques to enable high school students to improve their test performance are briefly outlined. The techniques cover pre-test preparation, strategies for use during test administration, and special skills for multiple-choice and essay tests. An advantage of students practicing their test-taking skills is that it will help them manage the anxiety that often accompanies tests. Good test-taking skills also help ensure that students' test scores reflect what they actually know. (TJH)

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ED302558

ERIC DIGEST

ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation

Number 101, September 1988

American Institutes for Research, 3333 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20007 (202)342-5060

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Improving your test-taking skills

by Ronald T.C. Boyd

If you are a high school student, taking tests is a fact of life. If you do well on tests, more opportunities will be open to you. Even after you are out of school, you may still have to take tests to get certain jobs. So whether you are taking a college entrance exam or a test written by your teacher, you need to have good test-taking skills. You can use several techniques both before and during a test to make sure that your test scores reflect what you really know.

What can you do before the test?

The best way to get ready for a test is to study from the beginning of the course. It's smart to prepare a little bit each day. Preparing for a test gradually lets you absorb the material, make connections between concepts, and draw conclusions. Studying each subject every night will save you the agony of having to cram on the night before a test.

There is no mystery to doing well on a test. Since most teachers create tests that are based on the reading assignments and on the material that they cover in class, you should read your assignments, listen to your teacher, and take good notes about what your teacher thinks is important. When you prepare to take a test, try these ideas:

- **Create your own study aids.** Aids such as flashcards, checklists, chapter outlines, and summaries will help you organize and remember the material better. You might think that it takes a lot of time to make these aids, but they will help you condense the test material into a manageable size.

- **Organize a study group.** Ask other students to arrange a time for a group to study together several nights before the day of the test. If you study with a group, you can combine everyone's resources. By comparing notes, you can sometimes determine what may appear on the test. A word of caution about study groups -- don't let them become social events. You could waste valuable time. Instead, throw a party **after** the test to celebrate your success.

- **Arrive early on the test day.** Rushing to a test or arriving late can destroy your concentration. Don't try to cram in some last minute studying or answer questions from other members of your class. Tactics like this are generally counterproductive and tend to confuse you.

What can you do during the test?

In addition to studying before the test, you should also be prepared when you come to take a test. Here are some general pointers that you can follow for any type of test:

- **Bring all the supplies you need.** Be prepared for taking a test by bringing paper, pencils, and pens with you. Don't depend on someone else to give these supplies to you.

- **Read and listen to all directions carefully before starting the test.** One of the most important test-taking skills is the ability to follow directions. Some students are so anxious to get the test over with that they skip the directions; this is often a costly mistake.

- **Budget your time.** Be sure to allow enough time to answer all parts of the test, not just the hard parts or the parts you know best. Some teachers may include a note about how much time you should spend on each section. Use these notes as guidelines to check yourself so that you don't spend too much time on one section.

- **Make a special effort to write neatly.** Although neatness may not officially count toward your overall grade, a teacher who is faced with a mountain of papers to grade will appreciate a clearly written test because it is easier to grade. Consciously or unconsciously, neatness has a positive effect on your teacher.

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- **If the test includes both essay and multiple-choice questions, fill out the multiple-choice part first.** Answering multiple-choice questions will help you remember the material and make connections between concepts. Multiple-choice questions may also contain information that you can use to answer essay questions.

- **If you have extra time, check your answers.** If you finish a test before your time is up, don't hand in your test. Use the extra time to check over your answers. Do not frustrate yourself, however, by concentrating on questions that you simply don't know how to answer.

How to take a multiple-choice exam

Multiple-choice exams usually require that you choose from three or four possible answers. Here are some strategies for succeeding on multiple-choice tests:

- **Make educated guesses.** Before you start, ask your teacher how the test is scored. If there is no penalty for guessing, answer every question, even if you have to guess. If you are penalized for guessing, blind guessing will probably hurt your score. If you can eliminate one or two of the choices, then guessing will be more profitable.

- **Don't get stuck on any of the questions.** Work through multiple-choice tests quickly and carefully. Don't get bogged down on a question that you can't answer or are unsure about. Make a small mark beside the question, and if you have the time, return to it later.

- **Fill in answers on standardized tests carefully.** Many standardized tests have separate answer sheets. Make sure that the number you are answering corresponds to the number of the question. If you skip a question, be sure to leave the space for that question blank. Make sure you fill in the blanks completely so that the machine that grades the test can easily record your answer.

How to take an essay test

Essay questions frequently appear on tests, especially for subjects that are not scientific or mathematical. Essay tests usually require you to pull information together, make relationships, and draw conclusions. On the whole, essay tests usually take more time than objective exams. Try to use your time wisely. Keep these guidelines in mind when you have to write an essay test:

- **Read all of the questions on the test before answering any of them.** The questions often contain valuable information that may be helpful when you write your answer. Reading all of the questions before starting will help refresh your memory about the material and will help you make an informed choice if you have to choose from several questions.

- **Underline key verbs in the question.** Essay questions usually focus on one or more key verbs. Here are some key words that often appear on essay exams:
  compare -- examine similarities and differences
  summarize -- briefly give the major points
  discuss -- examine or analyze in detail
  relate -- emphasize connections and associations
  Concentrate on these key verbs; they will give you clues to the type of information that your teacher wants to see in your essay.

- **Make a brief outline before you start writing.** Good organization is important in an essay exam. Take a few minutes in the beginning to collect your thoughts and write a brief outline for your answer. Essays often involve discussing certain key points. Identify these points and put them in your outline. If you run out of time and don't explain all of the points on your outline, write down the points in your outline and add a note saying that you ran out of time. You may get partial credit for your effort.

Taking a test doesn't have to be a dreadful experience. Practicing your test-taking skills will help you manage the anxiety that often accompanies tests. Good test-taking skills will not guarantee that you will get an "A" on every test, but they will ensure that your test score reflects what you really know.

Further Reading

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement U.S. Department of Education

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education under contract No. RI-88-062003. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

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